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AUTHOR Roan, Damaris
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ABSTRACT

In an effort to assist early childhood professionals to better understand special education practices and procedures in New York State that might affect classroom environment, this paper presents an account of one teacher's search for help with a special needs preschooler. Following a year in which only one-on-one instruction with the boy yielded any success, the teacher learned that the initial process of recommending an evaluation for disability is often very rocky. A child's age determines the support agency and each agency has slightly different evaluation procedures. Once the evaluation is completed, it may take a minimum of 6 months to receive services. Early childhood teachers can ease the process by self education, trusting their instincts, getting to know their students, keeping anecdotal records, and developing a teacher/parent dialogue. There is a definite increase in the number of pre-school children requiring special assistance, and early childhood professionals should maintain a basic understanding of the special education system in order to help children and their families through the process. (LBT)

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A First Year Teacher's Awakening to Pre-School Special Needs: Are You Ready?

Damaris Roan
EDE 705 Project Seminar
City University of New York: Lehman College
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ABSTRACT:

New York State guarantees a full educational opportunity for all students who have disabilities ages three through twenty-one years of age. In addition, a 1992 legislation was passed providing Early Intervention services to children birth through two years eleven months with developmental delays along with their families. This paper is presented in an effort to assist Early Childhood professionals better understand special education practices and procedures in New York State which might affect the classroom environment.

INTRODUCTION

When I accepted my first position as lead teacher for a three-year-old class in June of 1997 I was elated. My class would begin in September, plenty of time to research and plan. With the monthly themes in hand I began to browse through bookstores and libraries in search of perfect children's literature. I spent hours at the Teacher's Store examining creative new manipulatives for my student's busy little hands and poured through curriculum texts looking for innovative ideas that I could incorporate into my own lesson plans. I visited my new classroom frequently arranging and rearranging miniature furniture in an effort to create an environment in which the children could explore and learn safely and happily. After all, this is what I had been training for during the past two years; I felt ready and confident.

September came all too soon but I was armed with months of preparation, two years of early childhood theory and a workplace full of supportive and knowledgeable colleagues. I opened the classroom door and greeted the children one by one as they tentatively entered, holding tightly to their parent's hand. The array of colorful manipulatives and art projects I had selected for that morning proved too intriguing and they were soon involved in one activity or another, exploring every corner of the room.

As I spoke to parents and began the process of getting to know the children, I noticed a boy who seemed to be having trouble finding an engaging activity. He ran from table to table, pushing into other children in order to gain access to materials and taking toys from other children as if they were not there. I made a mental note: observe.

The school year progressed. The children began settling in, enjoying projects, establishing bonds with teachers, friendships with classmates and looking for comfort in

daily routines. Since the development of social skills is a main focus in the nursery school environment, much of our curriculum was geared toward cooperative group activities. I soon observed, though, that our one little boy continued having great difficulty participating in group activities. Even during solitary play, which was common for him, the approach of another child could easily escalate into hurt feelings or physical encounters. Simple activities became complex because he could not sit for any length of time, could not keep his body from touching others and was not able to follow one step directions. Enlisting the help of my director, along with parental input, we discussed and implemented various methods of instruction. It soon became clear that our efforts were not succeeding with one exception: one on one instruction. One adult needed to be available to this child at all times consequently, our teacher/child ratio was dramatically shifted making it impossible to devote full attention to the other children. My first year teaching experience was proving to be quite an education. Feeling somewhat disillusioned I sensed it was time to seek help.

FROM REFERRAL TO SERVICES

To say that I was not very knowledgeable about pre-school special education services is an understatement. The anxiety and frustration I was feeling prompted me to learn all I could about the process. In New York State referral for the evaluation of a pre-school child suspected of having a disability must be made by a child's parent and/or an involved professional such as a teacher or physician (Regulations of the Commissioner of Education, 1998). Although I had been communicating concerns to my student's parents and we had been working as a unit until now their reaction to my suggestion for evaluation of his behavior was both negative and hostile. The initial process of recommending an evaluation is very often rocky. Suzanne M. Peretz, Director of the Early Childhood Direction Center, agrees that most parents are upset at being informed of a potential problem and attributes those feelings to fear of special education stereotypes and denial of a potential problem concerning their child. Most parents and many educators are not aware of the positive changes that have occurred since the original legislation was passed in 1975. Changes to the legislation do not only guarantee access to appropriate evaluations and programs for children but have shifted the primary concern to the quality of a child's education (State Education Department, 1998). Moreover, parental involvement has been stressed empowering parents by requiring that they be direct decision making participants in every aspect of the process.

I discovered that depending on the age of the child there are two agencies mandated by the State to facilitate evaluations and provide services to pre-school children. The County Health Department implements the Early Intervention Program providing services to children birth through two years eleven months. The State Education

Department, through the local school district's Committee on Pre-School Special Education, is responsible for providing services to children three to five years old.

Evaluation procedures vary slightly between the two lead agencies, however, both are conducted by certified professionals looking for behaviors demonstrating "...a significant delay or disorder in one or more functional areas related to cognitive, language and communicative, adaptive, socio-emotional or motor development which adversely affects the student's ability to learn" (SED, Part 200-Students with Disabilities, 1998). The evaluation includes a close look at the child's history, a physical exam, psychological evaluations and comprehensive tests to evaluate the child's speech, hearing, physical and occupational abilities in order to assess his overall developmental capabilities.

Once the evaluation process is complete, a meeting is scheduled by the lead agency, which should include parents and required involved participants in order to review evaluation findings and formulate an Individual Education Plan. The Individual Education Plan is a "...written plan which specifies the special education programs and services to be provided to meet the unique educational needs of a student with a disability" (Final Approved New York State Plan for the Education of Students with Disabilities, 1995). As a participant in the evaluation process, the classroom teacher's contribution is a crucial component in the formulation of the plan. There is no one more qualified than the teacher to record and report observations of a child's behavior in the educational setting.

The process from referral to delivery of services is lengthy. For the Early Intervention Program, it could take up to forty-five days to complete an evaluation and at least six months before services are received. The Committee on Pre-School Special Education

process is shorter, approximately sixty school days from referral to delivery of services. In the interim the child remains in the same environment, the teacher, childcare provider or parent continues to help the child progress and parent's emotions fluctuate wildly from helplessness to anger with the teacher often receiving the brunt of these feelings.

WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO TO EASE THE PROCESS

1. Educate Yourself

   There are many organizations that can provide you and your school with films, workshops and literature to help you understand the special education process and therefore, better prepare you to work with the families of your students. The Early Childhood Direction Center, for instance, provides free services and information to families and teachers.

2. Trust Your Instincts

   Being the first professional to recommend a closer look at a child's behavior often makes you the target of negative feelings. In a recent survey of nursery school teachers 69% of the respondents agreed that referring youngsters for evaluation was a negative experience; 69% also felt that parents did not seem eager to pursue potential developmental problems at such a young age. Resource Specialist Liz Stern of the Early Childhood Direction Center stresses that if you feel there may be a problem stay with your instincts. Parent's reactions are usually strong making it difficult to maintain your professional objectivity; the focus, however, should remain on helping the child. With your expert help and support parents will eventually understand.

3. Know Your Students

   Observe your students closely during the first few weeks. Get to know what is normal behavior for each one. Watch the ways in which they interact, how they play together and separately. Listen for oral developmental patterns and try to ascertain audiological issues. Understanding individual student's development coupled with

your knowledge in the field of Early Childhood Education can help you recognize early signs of potential problems.

4. Keep Anecdotal Records

   Begin recording your observations immediately. Anecdotals can help you sort out your findings as well as provide specific examples to confused parents and evaluators.

5. Develop a Parent/Teacher Dialogue

   Establishing an early parent/teacher relationship is always good, however, in cases of behavioral or developmental concerns it is crucial. Involve parents in the instructional planning for their child. As a team you can develop strategies employable both at school and at home. Parents can be a great source of information and are usually very eager to help.

CONCLUSION

As a classroom teacher you may be the first professional to detect signs of possible developmental issues. You may also be among the first to voice a concern especially since the number of pre-school children requiring special education services seems to be rising. Among colleagues and co-workers I found a 100% consensus on the surge of young children needing special assistance. Lisa Brant of the New York State Education Department agreed, during a telephone conversation, that pre-school special education is increasing. In fact, all of the agencies I contacted, among them BOCES: Putnam/Westchester and the Committee on Pre-School Special Education Bedford Central, agree special services for very young children have been rising.

The growing number of youngsters requiring special assistance means that we need to be ready with at least a basic understanding of the special education system in order to help our children and their families through the process.

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ORGANIZATIONS

Board of Cooperative Educational Services, Northern Westchester/Putnam County, New York.

Committee on Pre-School Special Education, Bedford Central School District, Bedford, New York

Early Childhood Direction Center,
White Plains, New York.

State Education Department, Special Education Services,
Albany, New York.

State Education Department, STAC Program,
Albany, New York.

Westchester Department of Health,
White Plains, New York.